

Priest's familiar pattern isn't necessarily abuse

Accusation against Duluth native sparks questions into his past in Minnesota

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This is embarrassing. The Rev. Robert Bester, a Duluth native, is allegedly caught soliciting sex from an Alaskan man who tapes the conversation and hands it over to a TV station to air. It's a new twist (sex in exchange for church construction work?) that reignites clergy sexual abuse worries and raises questions about Bester's actions during his earlier career as a school superintendent and high school principal in Minnesota.

But before anyone jumps to conclusions, a little perspective is in order: The suspension of Bester, 75, by the Archdiocese of Alaska comes for allegedly soliciting sex from a grown man, not a child. Though that's hardly acceptable behavior for a priest, he hasn't been accused of any crime, and so far no one -- not former teaching colleagues nor students -- has publicly brought forth any evidence that he's ever broken the law. Significantly, Jeffrey Anderson, a Minneapolis lawyer who has represented scores of abuse victims, told the News Tribune's editorial page he'd previously never heard of Bester.

All that is important because even if the facts of the allegations are true (as those on tape tend to be), a rather pitiful offer of homosexual sex does not translate into proof of a dangerous pedophile on the loose. That's significant because too often during the priest abuse scandal the public bought into the stereotypical image of homosexual clergy preying on little boys, despite numerous studies showing sexual orientation has little to do with pedophilia and that heterosexuals are more likely to commit such crimes. Further, therapists estimate at least a third of priest sexual abuse victims are female.

The already messy situation of Bester, who is a priest of the Diocese of Crookston but served in Duluth at St. Mary's Hospital and on loan to the Archdiocese of Alaska, is complicated by his service as a hospital chaplain -- a position sometimes used by church leaders to harbor accused abusers -- and his traveling between church jurisdictions is another pattern seen among accused clergy. That Bester served in Duluth under then-Bishop Roger Schwietz, who later became his archbishop in Alaska, is also a curiosity. Yet counterbalancing those eyebrow-raising circumstances is his late entry, at 47, into priesthood, placing him among a group for whom there is little incidence of abuse.

Whatever Bester's history and any relationship it may have to his current woes, it renews public interest in knowing exactly what criteria the Catholic Church uses to assign its priests, especially if its bishops are serious about persuading the world that they are no longer shielding abusers. There may be good reasons behind Bester's unique career path, but without complete transparency from the church, we'll never know.